

On the Limits of Human Nature

– The Primacy of Society.

This paper concludes that the discussion on human nature and the 'problem of evil' is superficial. It is within the realm of possibilities with good humans in systems with evil outcomes. It is also conceivable with evil humans, in systems which make them behave as if they are good. Observational equivalence and difficulties of macro predictions with rigorous micro foundations further limits the scope of biology in the social sciences.

Human nature is one of the grand, timeless themes in literature and art. To this day, also considered a serious issue by specialists in the social sciences, psychology, the natural sciences and philosophy. One of the cornerstones in this discussion is whether humankind by its nature is good, evil or both – with immediate implications for the possible outcomes and organization of society.

Ideologies and religious traditions are for instance often ordered in a spectrum of perceptions of human benevolence. The capacity for cruelty and compassion is given serious thought in biology. Its insights carry over to psychiatry and psychology, which in turn influences sociologists and economists. It is to this day common to discuss aggregates using these categories. It is even fairly uncontroversial to state expectations about the ultimate fate of civilization based on one's assessment about human nature.

Underpinning this reasoning, is the assumption that if humans are good, then a good society and world order is a possibility. In contrast, if humans by their nature are evil, then the cruelty observed in the current order is what is to be expected, and there is very little we can do to improve things. Those who see virtue in the middle ground, point out that there is evidence, and indeed potential, for both good and evil in human nature. Thus human society should be constructed to nurture our intrinsic capacity to do good. Therefore, insights from biology about human nature are imperative for our understanding of the limits of human society in general.

Although conceived in this manner for ages, this discussion is superficial. It mirrors the [*theodicy*](#) and the problem of evil. If humankind is good – How can the world be evil? If humankind is evil – How can the world be (made) good? An alternative answer, is that it is completely within the realm of possibilities to have good human beings who operate within a system with an evil outcome. It is also totally conceivable with evil humans who act within a system that makes them behave *as if* they are good. Therefore, human nature as commonly understood in this discussion, is not essential for the outcomes of human society. Note that this objection is also valid for the aforementioned argument based on the 'virtuous' middle ground.

Within this line of thought, one natural take is to ensure robustness of a system by assuming that humans are evil, e.g. psychopaths, and construct psychopath-proof systems with benevolent outcomes. We can therefore focus on biological mechanisms necessary to e.g. induce certain types of organizations and outcomes. Intentions are taken into account if they interfere with the design. From this perspective, systems with expected outcomes, which get worse when humans are assumed to be good, are especially interesting. However, the question whether the world is evil because humans are too good, is still not necessarily fundamental for design purposes.

Our behavior can be understood as based in biology by definition. Such stance is nevertheless the basis for a reserved approach towards exiting synergies between biology and the social sciences.

Relevant objections to assertions about the biological basis of our behaviour is not that they are wrong, but perhaps redundant. They may not be particularly useful for the practicing social scientist – for the simple reason that such insights may be unnecessary for the explanation of a vast set of social phenomena.

The micro foundations of macro theories is a non-trivial problem when making predictions on the aggregate. Rigorous terminology from biology may give a false impression of something akin to a unified theory of everything. Once there, logic could take us from science to science fiction.

For purpose of context, it is instructive to point out the obvious. Some degree of biological imperialism into the realm of the social sciences is to be regarded as close to a tautology due to the fact that human societies are associated with at least one biological species. However, concerns about how societies, ours in particular, affect the nature and behaviour of the species of the planet is not far-fetched today due to widespread apprehensions about the [Anthropocene](#). In view of this, calls for a renegotiation of what should be regarded as society and nature may challenge previous perceptions. Especially how society alters what usually is regarded as the nature of a particular species. Considerations like these seem to bolster rivalries between the natural sciences, and the social sciences and humanities. The former have at times pointed out the unscientific claims of the latter, especially those made by post modernists, for very good reasons. Celebrity intellectuals have mobilized infected debates, which notwithstanding are trapped in the superficial (in the aforementioned sense) discussion.

An important objection is derived from the case when the biological alternative fails to beat [*observational equivalence*](#). Ironically, in such state of the world, these rigorous theories may play a part to stage an obscure post-modern scenario where researchers are free to choose a theory after idiosyncratic psychological, social, economic, political, cultural or other preferences of extra-theoretical nature. The scientific contribution remains meager if the [*psychological value added*](#) of the theory, is limited to aforementioned truisms about the ultimate biological nature of the species. In this intersection, the alternative is merely a permutation of labels – a mapping of words from the social-science to the natural science lingo – without any substantial improvements in understanding.

The usefulness of biology in the social sciences is contained in a set limited by a particular kind of redundancy and fiction. This remark may not elevate me to the position of the first social scientist in history, but it is fair to propose that it is time to drop an overrated debate with archaic ideological tendencies.

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